DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 445 049 TM 031 665

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TITLE The Long-Term Learning Agreement: A New Assessment Tool for Educators.
PUB DATE 2000-00-00
NOTE 9p.
PUB TYPE Opinion Papers (120)
EDRS PRICE MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS College Faculty; *College Students; *Contracts; *Grades (Scholastic); Higher Education; *Student Evaluation; Student Projects

ABSTRACT

Long-term learning agreements are compacts between faculty members and students that permit students to "borrow" a grade and then pay to keep it by carrying out specified supplementary activities during an extended period after an academic term ends. These agreements can combat grade inflation, reinforce students' self-confidence, allow instructors to diversify and individualize learning experiences and pathways, and counteract the tendency of students to "take" classes the way a person "takes" medicine, by consuming it as swiftly as possible and then forgetting about it forever. The cost of the agreements is negligible, their applicability throughout the college environment is broad, and their specifications can be decided on by instructors to meet any learning objectives they choose. A sample learning agreement is attached. (Author/SLD)

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ED 445 049

The Long-term Learning Agreement:

A New Assessment Tool for Educators

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Abstract

Long-term learning agreements are compacts between faculty members and students which permit students to "borrow" a grade and then pay to keep it by carrying out specified supplementary activities during an extended period *after* an academic term ends. These agreements can combat grade inflation, reinforce students' self-confidence, allow instructors to diversify and individualize learning experiences and pathways, and counteract the tendency of students to "take" classes the way a person "takes" medicine—that is, by consuming it as swiftly as possible and then forgetting about it forever. The cost of the agreements is negligible, their applicability throughout the college environment is broad, and their specifications can be decided upon by instructors to meet whatever learning objectives they choose.

The Long-term Learning Agreement:
A New Assessment Tool for Educators

In a college public speaking class I taught recently, the students and I developed a mechanism for reaching several goals I've long cared about as an educator. The mechanism is called the "long-term learning agreement," and I believe it may be useful to other college instructors around the country.

Nature of the Agreements

Students whose performance in a course doesn't measure up to their own expectations may, before the end of the academic term, join their instructor in signing a pledge to carry out certain supplementary activities during an extended period *after* the term ends.

Students who participate in long-term learning agreements acknowledge that the instructor will withdraw the points associated with the supplementary activities in the event that the students fail to complete them. In essence, the students borrow a grade and pay over time to keep it permanently by demonstrating that they have learned things which merit it.

Instructors can structure and define the terms of a long-term learning agreement any way they wish. Students might, for instance, be expected to engage in tasks

normally impossible to complete within the time constraints of a standard quarter or semester. In my public speaking class, as an example, one cluster of supplementary extended learning activities valued at 10 points out of 100 for the final grade was to join a local Toastmasters club, attend at least one of its meetings per month for six months, and submit a confirming written statement from the club president after each visit.

Indeed, the range of assignments which can be stipulated within a long-term learning agreement is limited only by the imagination of instructors. Following are just a few further examples of what students might be expected to achieve in various disciplines:

Science: Interview a number of authorities on a topic of contemporary interest, such as biotechnology, and prepare a report which summarizes and assesses their perspectives.

Mathematics: Solve problems in territory which was not thoroughly covered within a course but about which a student has demonstrated aptitude or interest—e.g., multivariate equations or projective geometry.

Humanities: Produce a work of art, visit and assess the exhibits of selected museums, attend a lecture series, or interview a speaker of another language in that person's

native tongue.

Social Sciences: Serve as a volunteer in a political campaign or write an analysis of how effectively a juvenile probation office achieves its mission.

Practical Applications/Implications

A well-crafted long-term learning agreement can benefit students and promote the facilitative aims of an instructor in several ways. First of all, because the agreement offers students an occasion to transcend the time boundaries and expectations of a particular course in order to achieve a higher grade, instructors may feel less pressure to reduce standards during the academic term. In other words, the likelihood of grade inflation in the actual body of a course may be diminished.

Second, some students are more extrinsically motivated than others, and the long-term learning agreement provides a special opportunity for those individuals who are predisposed to strive toward a particular grade to achieve that goal through hard work. In some cases, realizing this opportunity may reinforce students' self-confidence and help them maintain progress in the academic environment.

Third, long-term learning agreements present a chance for instructors to diversify and individualize the learning experiences and pathways they create for students. Because

the agreements breach rigid academic time blocks by extending over a lengthy period of time and may allow students considerable latitude in how and when to accomplish tasks, they may encompass elements which permit or require significant challenges and independent personal growth.

Fourth, long-term learning agreements resemble an "incomplete" grade in that they can aid students who encounter health or personal problems during a course which prevent them from finishing all the required work by the end of the term. The advantages of long-term learning agreements as opposed to an "I" grade, however, are that they start with an affirmation of students' abilities, incorporate a promise by the instructor to act as a partner with the students to develop those abilities, and yield a positive manifestation on the students' transcript.

Finally, perhaps the greatest implication and strength of the long-term learning agreement as a pedagogical measure is its potential to counteract the perennial tendency of students and faculty members alike to "take" a class in the same way a person "takes" a dose of medicine—that is, to consume it as swiftly as possible and then forget about it entirely. The long-term learning agreement, in contrast to this "medicinal" approach, may contribute

toward students' lifetime growth and development by focusing their attention, outside and beyond the range of the academic environment, on the nature and value of a particular kind of knowledge.

Conclusion

In summary, long-term learning agreements constitute a pedagogical innovation which enables instructors to keep in meaningful contact with students longer than the usual academic term and permits students to maintain their intellectual development for an extended period on an independent basis. The cost of the agreements is negligible, their applicability throughout the college environment is broad, and their dimensions can be decided upon by instructors to meet learning objectives of their choice.

LONG-TERM LEARNING AGREEMENT FOR COMMUNICATIONS 220-PUBLIC SPEAKING

The best learning continues and lasts. What students and teachers learn as a result of spending time in a particular college class should benefit them after the class concludes by promoting life-long growth.

This agreement specifies activities related to the goals of a course at Wenatchee Valley College which a student will perform within a specific interval after that course ends. It is a voluntary covenant whose successful completion will, in addition to providing the student with benefits s/he might not otherwise have attained during the class, entitle the student to a grade for that class higher than the one s/he would have earned if limited to what s/he could accomplish within the duration of the course.

COURSE DISCIPLINE/NUMBER: Communications 220 QUARTER/YEAR: Spring 2000

STUDENT'S PLEDGE

I, (signature)_____ promise to complete the activity(ies) checked below:

☐ Join Toastmasters and attend at least 1 meeting of a Toastmasters club each month in June, July, August, September, October, and November 2000, submitting a written statement from the club president to the LAS (Liberal Arts & Science) office at the end of each month (10 points).

☐ Attend six (6) meetings of the Hispanic Chamber of Commerce by December 12, 2000, and submit notes to the LAS Office from each meeting by 5 days after it takes place (10 points).

☐ Participate in a Wenatchee Valley College Poetry Slam by December 12, 2000 (5 points).

☐ Appear for at least two (2) minutes on commercial radio on a topic of my choice, for any length of time, by December 12, 2000, and submit an audiotape to the LAS Office by then (10 points).

☐ Call in to six (6) radio "talk shows"—one each in June, July, August, September, October, and November, 2000--and submit an audiotape of each conversation to the LAS Office by the end of each of those months (10 points).

I understand and agree that…

1. The grade appearing on my transcript at the end of this course in **June, 2000** presumes that I will keep this promise.
2. Phil Venditti will do his best to assist me to fulfill my promise.
3. If I fail to keep my promise, my grade will be lowered by the number of points associated with the learning activities I pledged to complete.

Student's Signature: Instructor's Signature:

_____ _____

Date: _____ Date: _____